Castlemaine Naturalist

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Monthly newsletter of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Rose Robin - Kalimna Park photo by Claire Morgan

How Nature Came to School

While sorting through some old magazines I recently found a November 1942 copy of "Wildlife – the Australian Nature Magazine" containing an article about the retirement of Major Wilson – the man who put the "touch of nature" into Victorian schools. Prior to becoming Leach's principle collaborator for the "Australian Bird Book", Senior Lecturer and Lecturer in Nature Study at the Melbourne Teachers' College for 30 years, and Lecturer in Method of Biological Science at the Melbourne University School of Education, he had developed a love and understanding of nature as a boy of six in 1877 "running wild in the bush" when his family came from Yorkshire and settled in Dimboola.

At 15 he became a monitor teacher and at 17 he began work in the Education Department. He was interested in the movement to introduce nature study into the school curriculum in 1900 and in 1906 the exhibit of the Raymond Island School, where he taught, aroused wide interest at the Bairnsdale nature study exhibition for it showed for the first time a study of nature applied to local activities – in this case, the local fishing industry and the local inhabitants.

As a result, the Director of Education, Mr Frank Tate, and Dr Leach, organising Inspector for Nature Study, chose Mr Wilson to superintend the Bairnsdale Court at the great Victorian State Schools' Exhibition in Melbourne later that year and it "stole the show". It showed that properly organised nature study had a great practical value; and nature study came to be highly respected as a school subject. Wilson was chosen to take a special course of training in nature study with nine fully qualified teachers under Dr Leach. He topped the course and was appointed lecturer at the Teachers' College.

He became Dr Leach's assistant and helped compile the "Descriptive List of birds of Victoria" that developed to become the classic "Australian Bird Book". Wilson supervised the paintings, preparation of blocks and the printing of the book. He became known as the leader of the Field Naturalist club of Victoria, organising secretary of the Bird Observers Club, and inspired the Gould League of Bird Lovers and the official introduction of Bird Day into schools. He had a distinguished career during the war for services rendered training and supervising men in gas warfare. After the war he completed a Science degree and a Master of Science degree. His life of active service coincided with the story of the rise of the study of nature in Australian education and Australian life.

Nature study in schools today is sure to be different with information technology providing access to so much more than in Major Wilson's time. The challenge for today's teachers is how to use the new technology to entice children away from their computers and out into the field for "hands on" nature experiences that will ignite that life-long interest nature.

Geraldine Harris

Bodrum Peninsula, Turkey

Joy Weatherill

Before leaving for my walking holiday on the Bodrum Peninsula in Turkey, Chris Morris said that he hoped I would be able to provide an article for the C.F.N. newsletter when I returned. I struggled desperately to find something relating to nature other than that of the obvious two-legged variety.

Quite different from the south of Spain at the same time last year, Turkey was drying off, with rocky (limestone) paths and sparse bush roamed by goats, no overhead shade (30'C); but luckily I had an umbrella to keep off the direct heat. I was carrying 5 bottles of water. There are no detailed maps of Turkey, and our walks each day had been estimated at 12 kilometers; but as I know I walk at 4 k. an hour and we walked for 5 hours, I would say 20. Our leader was using a GPS, and when we arrived at a fork in the road, he would say "Wait here while I go on. This thing only works when you're moving." I was not sure if this inspired confidence. Occasional distant views of the sea were hazy (smog?)

So - sum total - a couple of flowers; a tortoise which looked like a miniature from the Galapagos Islands, with a highly curved back; an interesting rock formation; and a 5 second (from the bus) view of some flamingos. That's the best I can do.

A Winter Rant

By Max Schlachter

I attended the Castlemaine 'Winter Festival' in Victory Park a few weeks ago and was struck by how much the festival's portrayal of winter was at odds with our local season.

The focal point of the evening was the lighting of a fire in the middle of the festival by the Winter King – a larger-than-life puppet of an old man with ghostly white hair, white robes and a headpiece of bare, twiggy branches. It was a fantastic costume.

The arrival of the winter king at the festival, accompanied by singing children, was a real highlight of the evening. But for a field naturalist it produced mixed emotions!

There we were, admiring the winter king with his white cheeks and twiggy crown while all around us forests full of verdant new growth and sprays of early-flowering Golden Wattles were watching on in quiet dismay; forests without a deciduous native tree to be found; and forests that would barely know the colour of frost under their canopy, let alone the fresh-snow pallor of the winter king's cheeks.

As most people realise when they give it some thought, our winter is not the harsh, life-sapping season that our old-world ancestors experienced and ingrained deeply in their culture. Our late summer season is much

more akin to that - a time when plants struggle to survive in the parched soil and the threat of bushfires is at its worst.

I think that the winter festival is a great idea. Celebrating *our* changing seasons is a wonderful thing to do, and perhaps one way that we can help to cure the 'nature-deficit disorder' that Geraldine Harris wrote about in the March 2014 issue of the Naturalist.

But let's not pretend that we have to wade through drifts of snow to get to the festival entrance. Let's adorn the Winter King with a sprig of Winter Wattle and give his cheeks a nice moss-green blush – something that reflects our own place in the world.

Old World Winter

Snake stories

Chris Timewell

In the same way that crocodile stories are still frequently added to the front page of Darwin newspapers to increase circulation, 100 years ago newspapers across Victoria delighted in reporting on close encounters with snakes. Here are a few local stories that caught my eye. While it'd be nice to think that snakes are treated by most people with more respect these days, I suspect that the urge to 'despatch' them all on sight is still held widely despite their legal protection from such unnecessary actions.

While working in his garden during the week, Mr R. Chapman lifted a piece of timber, under which was a snake 5 foot long, which he promptly killed. As it was much thicker in the girth than snakes usually are, Mr Chapman proceeded to open it, and was astounded when several live mice jumped from the inside of the snake and made off. (From the Gippsland Times, Monday 3 February 1913)

Mr Archie Sutherland, manager of the Standard Bearer Syndicate, at Barkers Creek, yesterday saw a large snake near the workings, but while looking for a stick the reptile escaped. A little later on, when fixing some timber round the top of the shaft, he saw the head of the snake in a hole in the bank. As he could not get it out of the hole he applied fumes from explosives and suffocated it. After clearing the dead snake out of the hole he was surprised to find 16 young snakes, about 9in long, which he speedily despatched. (From the Bendigo Advertiser, Wednesday 27 January 1909)

A large snake was yesterday unearthed by the nozzle of the Specimen Gully dredge, and was floating down towards the pump-hole when it was despatched with a well-directed blow by the manager. (From the Bendigo Advertiser, Monday 18 January 1909).

A sensation was caused in the men's day ward at the local [Castlemaine] Benevolent Asylum this morning through a large brown snake invading the premises. After much excitement Mr Tolstrup, the superintendent, despatched the reptile. (Also from the Bendigo Advertiser, Monday 18 January 1909).

A girl employed by Mrs Ford at Campbells Creek had an unpleasant experience [yesterday]. She turned on a tap connected with the Coliban water scheme, with the view of procuring some water, when a snake thirteen inches long emerged. (From the Riverine Herald, Tuesday 20 March 1906).

Snakes are very numerous in the Elphinstone district this year. During the past week the wife of a resident had shouldered a hollow log with the object of taking it to the house for firewood. Her little girl was following her, and, noticing a snake making its way out of the log, called to her mother, who dropped the log. Two brown snakes, each measuring about 6ft. in length, then crawled out, and were promptly cut to pieces by the woman, who, on dropping the log, had picked up a hoe, which was lying near at hand, and pluckily attacked the reptiles. (From the Argus, Wednesday 6 November 1912).

Field Trip to Ellis Falls - July 12

Joy Weatherill

Access to Ellis and Loddon Falls proved difficult, so after admitting defeat, members of the CFNC retired to the cafe at Glenlyon for hot drinks and refreshments.

In the area near Ellis Falls we had viewed a very steep gully, and then walked down to small rapids; passing on the way, some beautiful mosses and lichens.

As I was passing through Trentham on my way home to Gisborne, I decided to call in to Trentham falls, and found a spectacular sight, with tons of water pouring from the Coliban River over the rock face.

The information board (Trentham Landcare) adjacent to the falls, made reference to the columnar basalt cliffs on either side of the falls, and on the right lower down, a scree slope formed by rocks dislodged from the cliff face by glacial freeze and thaw - over 12,000 years ago. And on the left side - several layers; the top one, a thin ash layer, then a layer of old river silts undercutting at the back of the falls due to spray erosion; and Ordovician slates and sandstones - marine sediments approximately 500 million years old now exposed beneath the falls.

Text on the board by Dr Julian Hollis is as follows -

> Some 5 million years ago the old Coliban river flowed through a picturesque gully lined with blackwood forest.
>
> One day this environment was shattered and burnt as a wall of molten lava advanced northwards from a small volcano to the south, completely filling the gully. Remains of the timber and even a platypus skull have been found in the silty ash beneath the rock face.
>
> The lava cooled very slowly and as it solidified, contraction caused vertical cracking, creating columns.
>
> The present Coliban River has eroded by back-cutting. Once the falls were further downstream but undercutting and collapses have shifted them to their present position.
>
> Basalt columns and whole sections of rock

Trentham Falls Photos Joy W

face collapse as spray undercuts soft river sediments. In the near future, the area to the left is expected to fall. Tell-tale signs of this can be seen in water seepages and widening cracks. Already some large blocks have fallen, reminding us that this erosion is an ongoing and natural process.

Seeing the Trentham Falls was a pleasant end to the day for me.

Thank you to all the contributors of articles for this month's newsletter

We are always in need of articles, photos, observations, anything related to natural history, especially if of local relevance. If you are more of a photographer than a writer, photo observations with a note of explanation are always welcome. If you aren't yet 'digitised' or can't email them, (at reduced file size please) we can scan a print. We do our best to enhance photos for black and white copy, but we intend to experiment with colour in the near future.

Articles should be emailed in a standard word processor format (e.g., .doc, .docx, .odt, .rtf) or if handing over hard copy, please type and print on A4 in a basic font like Ariel or Times New Roman (for OCR transfer - saves me re-typing it all) Short notes or observations may be hand-written (provided I can read it!) Pass on to me or any committee member.

-- Editor

Observations

At the July meeting -

- Jan Hall has Greenhood orchids flowering on her property at McKenzie Hill
- Claire Morgan managed to get photos of the elusive **Rose Robin** in Kalimna Park on July 8 at around 3.30 pm (right and cover photo)
- Scarlet Robins were noted as seen in Castlemaine by three members
- Denis Hurley reported observations on his property in Merrifield st., north Castlemaine; 8 or 9 Silvereyes feeding on the ground, a fungus (not yet identified) in a log, and a photo of a Mouse Spider
- Max had noted Striped Greenhood orchids flowering in the Barkers Creek area, but was unsure of which species

Late July -

- Flock of more than 100 Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo heading north-east over Moonlight Flat - George Broadway
- Chris Timewell reported that on a cold morning on Granite creek (Sutton Grange), two Red-bellied Black snakes were seen in the open

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists
Coming events

Sat August 2 Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater survey. Meet 9am. at Duke St. Leader Chris Timewell

Fri August 8 meeting: speaker GRAEME WATSON - Australian mammals

Sat August 9 - Roadside clean-up, Pyrenees Highway - meet 9am. at cnr Pyrenees Highway and Willy Milly Rd. (Tait Decorative Iron)
Contact: Geraldine Harris

Wed August 20 - Broom Pull at the Castlemaine Botanical Gardens

Fri September 12 meeting: speaker Ern Perkins - The native pea plants

VISITORS ARE **WELCOME** AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

Club website - http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/

Subscriptions for 2014
Ordinary membership: Single $30, Family $40
Pensioner or student: Single $25, Family $30
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

2014 Committee

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